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SUBJECT: SERBIA: PATRIARCH PAVLE PASSES AWAY

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Summary

1. (SBU) Patriarch Pavle, the revered 95-year old head of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), passed away in his sleep on November 15. His death after more than two years of hospitalization triggered an outpouring of emotion, and the government announced three days of mourning to be followed by Pavle's November 19 funeral at the Rakovica Monastery near Belgrade. The Patriarch's death also set in motion complex procedures for the election of his successor, which likely will occur within the next two months. Although there already are clearly identifiable frontrunners, we anticipate that fierce lobbying will commence once the Patriarch is laid to rest. End Summary.

"Walking Saint" To Be Buried in Belgrade

2. (U) Born Gojko Stojcevic in a working-class family in Slavonija (modern-day Croatia) in 1914, Pavle endured a difficult childhood in which he lost both his parents. After working briefly in construction following World War II, he took his monastic vow in 1946 and progressed through the Church ranks. In 1957, the SOC Holy Assembly of Bishops (Sabor) elected Archimandrite Pavle as Bishop of Raska and Prizren, a diocese that includes parts of Kosovo. While serving in this capacity until 1990, Pavle called attention to the plight of Orthodox Serb believers in Kosovo.

3. (SBU) In December 1990, Pavle was chosen as the 44th Patriarch of the SOC, replacing Patriarch German just days before Slobodan Milosevic's Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) came to power in parliamentary elections. Although he spoke out against the devastating effects of the Balkan wars on the people, Pavle initially did not clearly distance himself and the Church from the Milosevic regime and also traveled to Republika Srpska to support the Bosnian Serb leadership, where Radovan Karadzic was photographed kissing Pavle's ring. He later waived Church "neutrality," participated in anti-government protests in 1997 and called for Milosevic to resign in 2000.

4. (SBU) Despite his extended hospitalization since 2007, which removed him from the public eye and reduced his Church role to that of figurehead, Pavle's death sparked an outpouring of emotion. The government announced a three-day mourning period beginning on November 16, and the parliament canceled its session scheduled for November 19. Thousands of citizens stood in line outside the Cathedral Church in Belgrade, including through the night, to pay their last respects to the man sometimes referred to as the "walking saint" because of his humility and adherence to the monastic life. Amfilohije Caretaker Until "Hand of God" Election

5. (U) At an emergency session observed by President Tadic on November 15, the five-member Holy Synod, or church government,

appointed its current head, Metropolitan Amfilohije of Montenegro and the Coastlands, as "caretaker of the Patriarchal throne" and formed a committee, consisting of the Synod, clergy, and five government representatives, to oversee funeral arrangements. In accordance with Patriarch Pavle's explicit wishes, he will be buried at the Rakovica Monastery near Belgrade, while the funeral service will take place at Belgrade's Saint Sava Church.

¶6. (U) Under the Church constitution, the Holy Synod is responsible for informing its clergy and followers that the Patriarch has "presented himself to God," which signals the start of the process of identifying his successor. Although the constitution allots 90 days for the election of a new Patriarch, the Synod has declared 40 days of mourning and will not conduct an election before this period passes.

¶7. (U) Current election procedures, which may come under challenge as part of the "election campaign," are complicated. Only bishops who have served five years or more in that capacity have the right to vote or be nominated, and their role is to identify three "finalists" through repeated rounds of elimination voting. The final choice among the three candidates selected by the bishops is a "blind draw" in which an abbot from one of Orthodoxy's major monasteries, representing the "hand of God," chooses the Patriarch by selecting one of three sealed envelopes containing the candidates' names. The new Patriarch typically is enthroned in the Cathedral Church in

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Belgrade the day after his election, while the final enthroning ceremony takes place in the old seat of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Pec Patriarchy (Kosovo).

Possible Successors

¶8. (SBU) Given the Patriarch's extended illness, during which the Sabor denied his October 2008 request to relinquish his position (Ref A), there has been much speculation about his successor and the topic has dominated recent Sabor sessions. As many as 10 names have figured prominently in press reports, and speculation - and jockeying for position among contenders - likely will increase exponentially in the weeks ahead.

¶9. (SBU) Most analysts believe that the current front-runner remains Metropolitan Amfilohije, due to his prominent role in the day-to-day activities of the Church. While unpalatable to Western ears, his recent ill-advised stances on the anti-discrimination law, the cancelled Pride Parade (Refs B and C), and opposition to the Vojvodina Statute are unlikely to hurt his support within the SOC. Two other highly influential bishops - Bishop Irinej of Backa, Synod member and spokesperson, and Bishop Hrizostom of Zica - also are considered serious candidates from the old guard. Irinej is considered more ecumenical and thoughtful than Amfilohije. Hrizostom previously administered the U.S. West Coast bishopric, but those familiar with him are impressed by how little an impression life in California seems to have made on him.

¶10. (SBU) A second group of potential successors consists of bishops aged 41 to 54 who are seen in some circles as unburdened by history and able to revitalize the Church. Bishop Grigorije of Zahumlje and Herzegovina, bolstered by his May election to the Synod (Refs D and E) and reportedly enjoying support from close ties with Republika Srpska Prime Minister Milorad Dodik, in particular appears to be a candidate on the rise. Bishop Fotije of Dalmatia, also selected to the Synod in May 2009, Bishop Joanikije of Budim and Niksic, and Bishop Ignatije of Pozarevac and Branicevo also are members of this group.

¶11. (SBU) Seventy-eight-year old Bishop Irinej of Nis, vicar to Patriarch German and a Synod member since May 2009, and Bishop Jefrem of Banja Luka, who likely would enjoy support of the "Bosnian lobby," are seen as potential compromise candidates.

Comment

¶12. (SBU) Beloved by the Serbian Orthodox faithful for his humility and wisdom, Pavle left a legacy that is open to some interpretation. His passing may be a blessing in disguise as it provides a much-needed opportunity for the SOC to address the Church's role in 21st century Serbia. A new Patriarch may be able to revitalize the Church, although it will be a challenge to emerge unscathed from the bruising battle for succession. End Comment.
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